

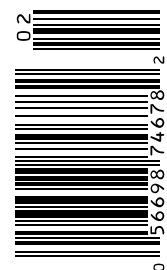
NOAH'S SILENCE AT THE END OF THE WORLD

FINDING THE COURAGE TO ARGUE WITH
THOSE WHO CLAIM TO SPEAK FOR GOD

By Patty Krawec

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a devotional
written by you
for you

THE UPPER ROOM[®]
DAILY DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

“HAGAR—A WOMAN WHO HAS BEEN SEXUALLY ASSAULTED—IS THE FIRST PERSON TO NAME GOD.”

Unsatisfied

Popular evangelical marriage advice has reduced sex to a woman’s “duty” and enabled abuse. Sheila Wray Gregoire offers a better way.

by Krispin Mayfield



30

20

Noah’s Silence at the End of the World Do we have the courage to argue with those who claim to speak for God?

by Patty Krawec

26

‘Truth Crushed to Earth Will Rise Again’ A year after the Jan. 6 attack, truth is still a rare—and essential—commodity.

by Lisa Sharon Harper

Voices

6	Spotlight
9	Grain of Salt The good news of social justice. by Jim Rice
	Commentary
12	Voting How poor and low-income voters could determine the 2022 midterms. by Shailly Gupta Barnes
14	War Intertwined religion and violence fuel our culture of war. by Kelly Denton-Borhaug
15	The Black Church Meeting the future requires the ability to evolve. by Sakena Young-Scaggs
	Columns
16	From the Dust This beloved land holds many stories. by Liuan Huska
17	Sacred Curiosity Providing for the one and the many. by José Humphreys III
	Eyewitness
18	Looking to space. by David Wilkinson



46

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37

Vision

	Culture
35	Books A new anthology celebrates the many sides of Daniel Berrigan. by Joyce Hollyday
37	On Film <i>Procession</i> demonstrates the restorative potential of creative expression. by Abby Olcese
38	Curated Tony Kushner's musical <i>Caroline, or Change</i> shows the toll exacted by a stratified society. by Faith-Marie Zablé
	Reviews
39	Books Kelly Brown Douglas wrestles with Black suffering in <i>Resurrection Hope</i> . by Greg Taylor
40	Two grounding spiritual resources for Lent and beyond. by Julie Polter
	Poetry
42	Bearing his cross of puzzled words. by Rashaad Thomas
	Living the Word
44	Epiphany's unhurried revelation. by T. Denise Anderson
	H'rumpus
46	The Christian way to not show up for work. by Jenna Barnett

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From the Editor

The revisionist versions of Jan. 6—some would call it gaslighting—began soon after the attempted coup at the U.S. Capitol a year ago. One Republican member of Congress likened it to “a normal tourist visit.” Others called the rioters “peaceful patriots,” and still others claimed that, no, they weren’t Trump supporters at all. These apologists for sedition seemed to want people to forget that, um, it’s all on video. It quickly became painfully evident that the Jan. 6 insurrection, like the big lie it was based on, was not only an attack on constitutional processes, but on truth itself.

We’ve seen that same spirit of intentional obfuscation, of attempts to hide from the truth, in the efforts—including by many conservative Christians—to prevent the honest teaching of the shameful aspects of our nation’s racial history. As Lisa Sharon Harper explains in this issue, these “narrative gaps”—the differences between the myths we tell about ourselves and the complicated, tumultuous realities of our nation’s checkered history—also play out in many of our own family stories. Truth, in matters personal, familial, and social, may indeed set us free, but it never comes without deliberate, resolute struggle.

RESPONSE

Three Stars (and Some Tears)

In “Sensing the Presence of Angels” (December 2021), Marlena Graves writes that even the God of the universe sought asylum in the wake of violent oppression. “This is a good reminder of the *imago dei* in each human regardless [of] where they come from, and the blessing we receive by embracing them,” Robert Church [f](#) responded. “Yes, not merely an immigrant, but a refugee,” Jeanne C Parker [f](#) added. Patricia L. Conklin [f](#) appreciated December’s “New & Noteworthy” recommendation of *Passing*, a film based on Nella Larsen’s 1929 novel of the same name: “Three stars—and some tears.”

Write us: response@sojo.net



"IF YOU ARE
NEUTRAL IN
SITUATIONS
OF INJUSTICE,
YOU HAVE
CHOSEN THE
SIDE OF THE
OPPRESSOR."

Desmond Tutu
South African Anglican Archbishop

CONTRIBUTING



José Humphreys III

"How does a church of middle-class, educated professionals join people who have been justice-impacted and are healing from complex forms of trauma?" Pastor and organizer José Humphreys (p. 17) pursues this question through his congregation's burgeoning partnership with the Exodus Transitional Community—a faith-based organization that "builds on the resilience of people coming back home from prison." For Humphreys, holistic health and justice are connected in God's creation, where "the sacred is everywhere."



T. Denise Anderson

As an ordained minister and acting director of Racial Equity and Women's Intercultural Ministries with the Presbyterian Mission Agency, T. Denise Anderson (p. 44) brings her social location, values, and authentic self to her writing and teaching. A creator and "artist at heart," Anderson finds freedom in the lectionary as the "Spirit is already always speaking through the text for the times" and helping us to lean into what is "left still to remedy within our culture and within our church."

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54%

Americans who supported the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan

More than 1.3 million

U.S. troops on active duty

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1

GRAIN OF SALT

BY JIM RICE

TWISTING THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS

For Archbishop José Gomez of Los Angeles, social justice movements are “pseudo-religions.” In a November speech, Gomez said that “today’s critical theories” are “profoundly atheistic,” that they spring from a “Marxist cultural vision,” and that they “resemble” heresies in church history. He even blamed social justice movements for “causing new forms of social division, discrimination, intolerance, and injustice.”

Black Catholic theologians and others responded to Gomez’s remarks with a petition that read, in part, “Your speech was particularly painful and offensive to Black Catholic advocates in the United States who have organized for racial justice in the face of indifference and even hostility from many white Christians.” The National Black Sisters’ Conference pointed out that “BLM is not a pseudo-religion; nor is it a ‘dangerous

WHEN CHURCH LEADERS ATTACK SOCIAL JUSTICE AS “ATHEISTIC,” THEY’RE BESMIRCHING THE GOSPEL ITSELF.

“MANY YOUNG PEOPLE TODAY SEE ORGANIZED RELIGION AS A DANGEROUS FORCE.”

substitute for true religion.’ It is a movement very much in the tradition of Catholic Social Teaching.” And someone ought to introduce Archbishop Gomez to Pope Francis who, in his message for World Youth Day this fall, encouraged young people to “Arise! Uphold social justice, truth, and integrity, human rights. Protect the persecuted, the poor and the vulnerable, those who have no voice in society, immigrants.”

But Gomez’s attack on social justice wasn’t only ignorant of the long tradition of Catholic social teaching. His ideologically driven manifesto, based more in partisan contemporary politics than in biblical values, directly contradicts Jesus’ instructions to his followers to be makers of peace and builders of justice, a motif that serves as a through line from Genesis to Revelation.

When church leaders such as Gomez—who is president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops—attack social justice as “atheistic” and claim it’s outside the purview of the gospel, they’re not only

disparaging people who put their faith into action, they’re besmirching the gospel itself. And such a “reverse testimony”—the opposite of bearing witness to gospel truth—has consequences. Many young people see their engagement in acts of social protest, such as Black Lives Matter demonstrations, as expressions of religious or spiritual practice, according to a recent survey by the Springtide Research Institute of 10,000 people ages 13 to 25. “What’s striking is that [young people] also say they’ve received little support in their convictions from organized religion,” explained Springtide’s Josh Packard, in an analysis he co-wrote with Revs. William Barber II and A. Kazimir Brown. “Many young people today instead see organized religion as a dangerous force, one that twists the teachings of Jesus or the Quran.” Statements like Gomez’s certainly contribute to that perception.

The Christian faith is inherently incarnational—living belief is embodied in action in the world around us. To criticize such actions, especially with such politicized language, will rightly be perceived as offering a toothless, watered-down version of the gospel, one that offers comfort to the status quo and little in the way of relevance for our society and the world. It’s not surprising that that version isn’t well-received by the youngest generation. You want to reach young people? Tell the truth. And that truth includes the good news of social justice. ♦



Jim Rice is editor of *Sojourners* magazine.

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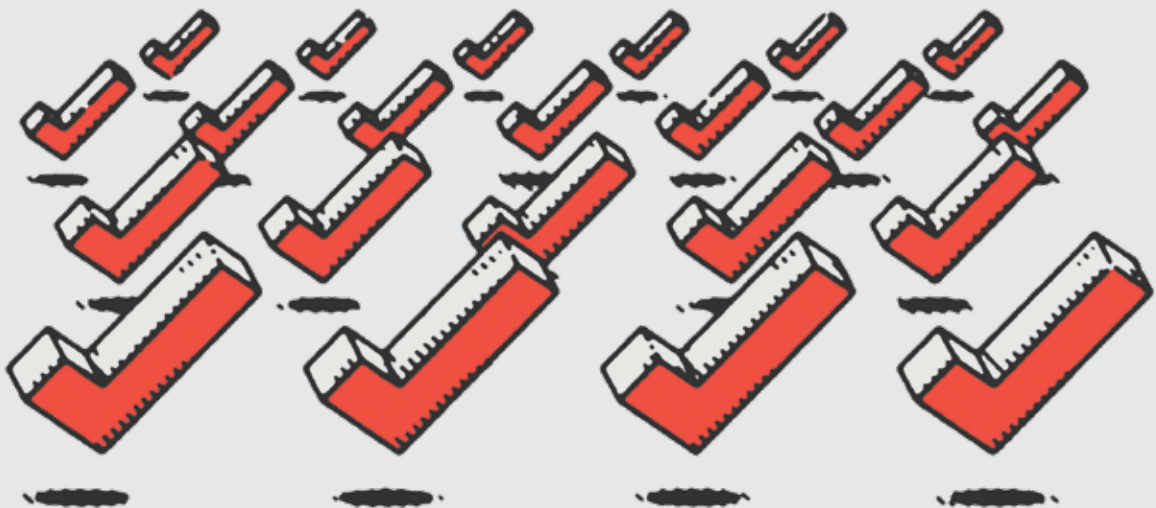
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THE POOR PEOPLE'S BALLOT

Will 140 million low-income voters decide the next election?



2

In the lead-up to the 2020 elections, the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival organized a massive voter drive reaching 2 million poor and low-income voters in 16 states, including battleground states such as Arizona, Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. This effort, as shown in our October report, "Waking the Sleeping Giant: Poor and Low-Income Voters in the 2020 Elections," contributed to higher turnout among poor and low-income voters who may be key to shifting the political terrain in 2022, 2024, and beyond.

According to our research, poor and low-income voters (households with income under \$50,000 a year) made up approximately one-third of the voting electorate in 2020. They made up at least 20 percent of the total voting population in 45 states and Washington, D.C. In battleground states (those with a margin of victory of 5 percent or less in 2020), the numbers were higher, ranging between 35 and 45 percent of the total

vote share. These findings cut against long-standing assumptions that poor and low-income people are apathetic about politics or elections. Instead, we found that they register at comparable rates as the rest of the country—and they vote, especially when their concerns are on the agenda.

A closer look at the demographics of the battleground states shows that white low-income voters accounted for a higher vote share than all other racial segments of low-income voters combined. Given the small margins of victory and the high vote share of poor and low-income white voters in these states, it is likely that some of these voters joined other low-income minority voters to cast their ballot for the same ticket and agenda. This challenges the prevailing narrative that poor and “working class” white voters vote against both their own interests and the interests of low-income minority voters. In fact, not only is it possible to build multiracial coalitions of such voters around a more progressive agenda, it may be necessary to bring these low-income voters together to win that agenda.

Indeed, our nonpartisan voter outreach drive led by the Poor People’s Campaign had a positive and statistically significant impact on low-income voter turnout in 2020. In Georgia, our outreach turned out more than 39,000 new low-income voters, in an election decided by roughly 12,000 votes. While we cannot interpret these findings to say that these voters were decisive to that outcome, these numbers emphasize the powerful political impact poor and low-income voters could have if engaged directly and on their interests.

Our findings offer a path toward realizing the nation we have yet to become. Policies that would improve the lives of poor and low-income people—around living wages, child care, paid leave, affordable health care, debt relief, clean air and water, safe communities and more—are widely popular but far from fully implemented.

Poor and low-income voters have been largely ignored in electoral politics, but according to this data, they could make the difference in the 2022 midterm elections. Let this be a lesson to all: The

**POLICIES THAT WOULD
IMPROVE THE LIVES OF POOR
AND LOW-INCOME PEOPLE ARE
WIDELY POPULAR BUT FAR
FROM FULLY IMPLEMENTED.**

path to electoral victory in this country goes through the 140 million poor and low-income people—ignoring them is impossible.

The poor are the political force—the sleeping giant—we have been waiting for. ❖

Shailly Gupta Barnes (@ShaillyBarnes), author of the October 2021 report “Waking the Sleeping Giant,” is policy director at the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice.



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COMMENTARY

BY KELLY DENTON-BORHAUG



WAR IS NOT SACRED

**Runaway growth in military spending
is not a Christian value.**

War-culture in the United States is so pervasive and seamless that Americans struggle to see it, much less question it. More than \$16 trillion has been spent since 2001 as “the calculus of 9/11 led to runaway growth in military spending,” according to the National Priorities Project. Forget Biden’s drawdown in Afghanistan and realistic proposals emphasizing diplomacy and economic cooperation. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III declared in June that the \$752.9 billion request in the FY 2022 military budget aligned with “the will of the American people.” What role do Christians play in this destructive reality?

Here is the problem: Religion and violence intertwine to fuel our ubiquitous war-culture. And in making war “sacred,” the death-dealing consequences are concealed from our consciousness.

Consider a common vehicle decal. A U.S. soldier stands silhouetted before an American flag shaped as angelic wings. The text reads: “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13, ESV). Another popular meme says, “Remember that only two forces ever agreed to die for you—Jesus Christ and the American soldier.”

The decal verse is ripped out of context. Jesus’ soliloquy is on servant leadership, characterized by the loving washing of one another’s feet—not killing. Religious frameworks are hijacked to place a “sacred canopy” of meaning over the use of deadly force. For Christians, cognitive dissonance should abound. However, using the Bible to bless war is so common we hardly question it.

Are our churches teaching the gospel—that Jesus rejected militarized force (according to respected biblical historical criticism) and

was executed for insurrection against the empire (even as he welcomed many of those coopted by imperial hegemony)? How can the nonviolent Messiah be conflated so easily with implementing the violence of war?

The widespread use of these idolatries dulls us to deeper awareness of how Christian symbols are twisted and weaponized to give a sacred gloss to war-culture. In the meantime, the phrase “thank you for your sacrifice” throws a silencing blanket over the unbearable losses experienced in war. Historically indefensible and morally misleading, these hijacked messages sacralize violence and distance us from the unjust and overwhelming moral pain of war borne by our military siblings.

Christians’ lack of awareness or willful ignorance results in complicity with the exploitation of religious language and symbols to conceal and justify a world of pain—the atrocity of military suicide borne out of veterans’ moral anguish; the destructive hold of military spending on all our lives; and the nearly 801,000 people killed by direct war violence in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, and Pakistan in the post-9/11 wars.

Instead of perpetuating lies about the meaning of war, churches could host gatherings on Veterans or Memorial Day to listen to the painful aftermath of war in the lives of service members, veterans, and war refugees. We might study moral injury—the life-extinguishing anguish that haunts too many veterans who betrayed their own moral compass or were morally betrayed by leaders and systems of war-culture in our own era of empire.

Sadly, “freedom isn’t free!” remains the uncritical mindset of a people who are “easy with war,” as theologian Stanley Hauerwas characterized Americans. Can we pay closer attention to Jesus’ active nonviolent resistance against empire to galvanize sharper awareness and protest today and deepen support for those bearing the greatest costs of our 20 years at war?

Peacebuilding starts with pulling back the “sacred canopy” shielding U.S. militarization and war and taking a long, hard look at the ways Americans have been taken in by a culture enthralled with violence. War is not sacred. ✱

Kelly Denton-Borhaug, author of *And Then Your Soul is Gone: Moral Injury and U.S. War-culture*, is professor of religion at Moravian University in Pennsylvania.

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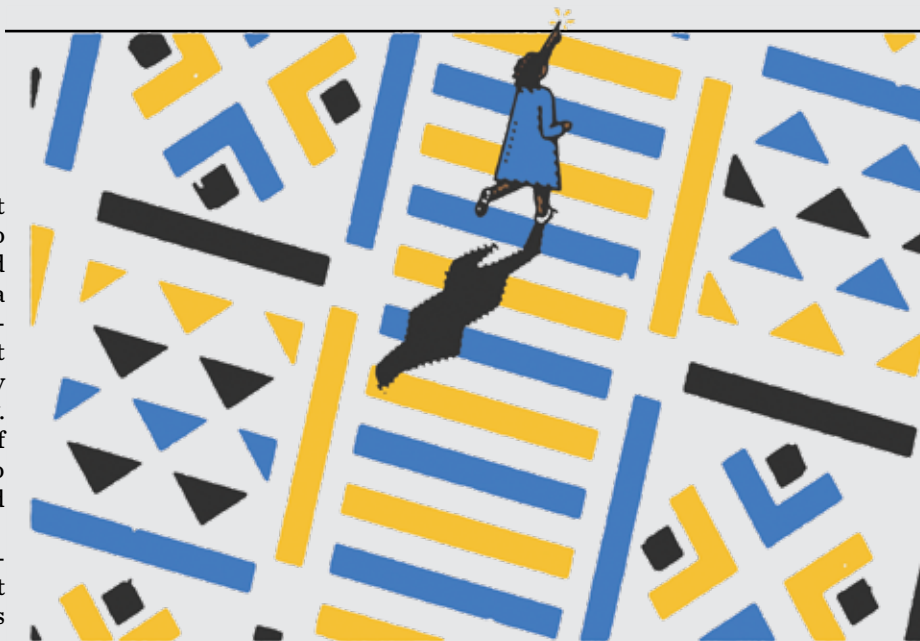
BLACK FUTURISM, BLACK CHURCH

"The Future Is Black!" is a clarion cry at the entrance to "Mothership: Voyage into Afrofuturism," an exhibit at the Oakland Museum of California. Its placement is a prickly reminder of the indomitable persistence of Black lives, and affirmation that in the imagined future they will not only *matter* but be present, alive, and thriving. This declaration of an imagined future of thriving Black lives must be thrust also into the importance of the Black Church and Black faith.

Much ink has been spilled on the misnomer that "God is dead"—with a caveat that the Black Church is dying—by scholars and practitioners alike. But, the monolithic nature of the Black Church has long been dispelled by prolific sociologists of religion such as W.E.B. Du Bois, C. Eric Lincoln, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, and Anthea Butler, to name only a few. While the debate of the status of the Black Church rages on, the lived reality of the Black Church is that it is very much engaged and transforming as an institution in America and around the globe.

The future of the Black Church rests in its ability to evolve and meet the growing needs of the communities it serves. It will require not only attention in times of political and social upheaval but also attending to the necessity of joy and to a salvific, life-giving acceptance of adherents as whole human beings. The latter has proven a challenge for churches that impart patriarchal misogynoir onto believers who come to them for hope and salvation, only to find ecclesiastical hurt in the name of the God of their ancestors. These are two prongs of struggle for transformation within the church life that are not new.

Nonetheless, in a world with ongoing crises and ravaged by multiple pandemics, the call remains that the "Future of the



Church Is Black!" What Americans, particularly African Americans, know is that the Black Church will be different—and cannot help but be—as the world changes around it.

Churches that learn from the past and build toward a vision that is life-giving rather than death-dealing will thrive as interlocutors in the lives of those hungry not merely to mark their Blackness but to mark all of who they are in their human sacred lives. This approach is what theologian Prathia Hall called a "Sankofa ethic," in which Black people of faith walk and live in such a way to remember their past, through occasions such as Black History Month or other cultural markers, but also never cease moving forward toward personal and institutional growth that builds upon a legacy that affirms Black humanity.

In short, to the degree that the Black Church cultivates Black joy and evolves as a place and space of transformative hope that embraces the full humanity of individuals, it will live into a future as an institution. It will then be a life-giving liminal space where it not only saves souls, but provides new imagined Black alternative futures for the souls it serves. ✕

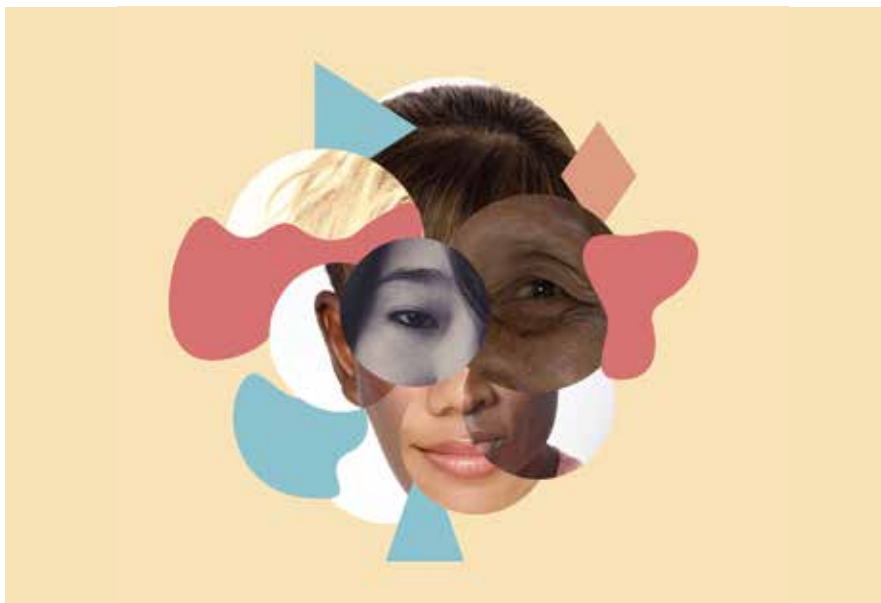
**THE FUTURE OF
THE BLACK CHURCH
RESTS IN ITS ABILITY
TO EVOLVE.**

Sakena Young-Scaggs, an itinerant elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, is pastor of Stanford Memorial Church at Stanford University.

FROM THE DUST

BY LIUAN HUSKA

HISTORY LIVES IN OUR BODIES



A few months into the pandemic, as the country started to notice the uptick in hate crimes against Asian Americans, caring friends checked in to ask, “Are you okay?” I found myself metaphorically turning around to see if they were talking to someone behind me. I was so unused to having my ethnic vulnerability seen and named.

Then a year ago, in March 2021, a young white man killed six Asian women in spas around Atlanta. This time it was clearer—I was not okay. My mother is a massage therapist and has worked in spas in Florida, where the killer was headed when police apprehended him. This time, I could say with more certainty, “This hurts me.”

In the blooming of Asian American consciousness since that event, however, I’ve continued to wonder how much of what happens to other AAPI (Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders) folks around the country, and back through time, is mine to own. Writer Jay Caspian Kang argues that Asian Americans who came to this country after the 1965 Hart-Celler Immigration Act have little to no connection with earlier generations of Asian Americans, whose circumstances were vastly different. Between the lines, Kang is saying to us later waves of immigrants, “That’s not your history.”

But if that were the case, what right does my husband (whose great-grandparents came to the United States from Europe in the early 20th century) have to identify with the Revolutionary War or American slaveholding? Can we only take ownership of history that our blood ancestors experienced?

Kang is right in some ways—history lives in our bodies. Recent studies suggest that traumatic events mark not only family systems but our biology. Extreme stress causes epigenetic changes, as genes that protect

3

against or increase risk to various diseases are turned on or off in current and subsequent generations. I take Kang’s words as caution against flippantly identifying with “the oppressed” when my socioeconomic—and physical—reality is quite different. At the same time, later waves of Asian immigrants have our own generational trauma to process.

I still believe solidarity is possible and can be expressed in ways that don’t gloss over real differences. The Christian story, after all, is an invitation to weave our individual and family stories into a larger narrative. Too often, those in power have wielded the story in ways that silence quieter voices that might challenge the telling. We would be more honest—and open more space for conversation—to assume multiplicity: Christian *stories*, AAPI *experiences*, American *histories*. Different—and even contradicting—experiences need not negate one another.

So I walk as an Asian American woman on a land scarred by what Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah call a “dysfunctional theological imagination” that privileges white bodies of European descent. This beloved land holds many stories—of suffering and resilience; oppression and opportunity; solidarity and discord. I want to hear them all. ✦

Liuan Huska is author of *Hurting Yet Whole: Reconciling Body and Spirit in Chronic Pain and Illness*. She lives on ancestral Potawatomi land near Chicago.



SACRIFICES OF JOY

Strolling through my neighborhood in East Harlem recently, I noticed whole blocks that felt almost desolate. Along 3rd Avenue I saw stretches of sidewalk once bustling with small businesses, street vendors, the smell of incense, and the sound of West African music, now abandoned amid the echoes of what was.

As a citizen of these barrio streets, the feeling I get is a form of ecological despair. And while some of these places of disinheritance were there before, it seems to have gotten worse during the COVID-19 pandemic. The glitz of gentrification fails to mask increased homelessness, open substance use, and the fatigue many parents and caretakers have experienced, even after the mandated quarantine ended.

At the height of the pandemic, I remember someone telling me, “We’re all in the same water but not the same boat.” Yes, it’s true, the privileged and those who are poor have been hit by the pandemic in multiple ways, but the impact is always felt differently among the most vulnerable. Yet here we are together—a part of the same ecosystem. I’ve done funerals for the poor and the privileged alike; grief has a way of making us feel more tender and more human.

In some ways East Harlem’s apocalypse is a view of our local world from the outside in. If apocalypse means “unveiling,” what is reflected in our physical barrio can be a mirror to our own troubled emotional landscapes, our souls, and even the trauma trapped in our bodies.

For healers—clergy and activists alike—moments like this can invite us to become more curious and circum-

spect about where to focus our energies. Like a clearing after a storm, the clarity that comes with apocalypse can help us better discern where to sacrifice our efforts, where to channel the power and practices of our faith more precisely.

When I first went into justice work, I thought (unconsciously and somewhat arrogantly) that matters such as race, the school-to-prison pipeline, and the divides within the American church would be healed in my lifetime. But, experience has taught me that some of this work is generational. So, specificity is vital when it comes to making the right sacrifices in this next season of the journey.

One way I do this is as a facilitator who helps foster trauma-informed spaces at Exodus Transitional Community, a faith-based organization working with people who are impacted by the criminal justice system. During our onboarding process, we curate stories of resilience while seated in a circle together. One of our new employees, Ed, is earning his first “legit” paycheck after 27 years of being incarcerated. Stories like Ed’s are not uncommon; people have experienced the worst our broken system has thrown at them, yet here they are, reclaiming their lives and giving it back in service to the world. With each story that is shared, we clap in celebration, because every story and every person is sacred. And this is no small thing.

If “to sacrifice” literally means to make something sacred, then with great purpose we can offer up a “sacrifice of joy,” knowing that even our meager efforts—our loaves and fishes placed in God’s hands—can nourish and provide for the one and the many. So let us continue to make the right sacrifices to serve a world in need. ✦

José Humphreys III, author of *Seeing Jesus in East Harlem: What Happens When Churches Show Up and Stay Put*, is a native New Yorker, ordained minister, and co-founder of Metro Hope Church in New York City.

**“WE’RE ALL IN THE
SAME WATER BUT NOT
THE SAME BOAT.”**

EYEWITNESS

4



**"SCIENCE IS
GIVEN TO US
AS A GIFT."**

THE GOD OF THE UNIVERSE



"We need to think about God as the God of the whole universe, rather than just the God of me, the God of our nation, or the God of just this planet Earth. That perspective is deeply within the biblical material. Whether you look in Genesis or the Psalms or at the beginning of John's gospel or the Letter to the Hebrews, there is this sense of the greatness of God. It's something that we need to relearn, particularly as we encounter the possibility of life elsewhere. The colonization of space is probably inevitable in the long run.

If there is primitive life deep below the surface of Mars, should we be mining Mars for resources? If we *do* build cities in space, where are the raw materials going to come from? How do we deal with the reality of both nations *and* private companies wanting to do those sorts of things in a way that stops us exploiting the natural environment?

Science is given to us as a gift. It brings with it a responsibility to use it wisely for the benefit of all. As a theologian, I need to take seriously that all of this occurs within our world, which is both good and fallen, with institutions and nations that are looking to space for their own economic advantage or military supremacy. The problem is that many of us think, *It's all science fiction. It's decades in the future.* But we need to talk about it now. Christian leaders need to approach science with humility and with confidence and joy, rather than fearfulness or silence." ✱

David Wilkinson, an astrophysicist and Methodist minister, is principal of St. John's College and professor of theology and religion at Durham University in England. He spoke with Sojourners' Jenna Barnett.



NOAH'S SILENCE AT THE END OF THE WORLD

Finding the courage to argue with those who claim to speak for God

By Patty Krawec / Illustrations by Matt Williams

NOAH'S ARK IS A STRANGE CHILDREN'S STORY.

We decorate nurseries and bedrooms with animals marching two-by-two. The images festoon baby items and fill the pages of countless children's books. I've sat on the floors of many church nurseries playing with babies and Noah's ark toys and questioned its appropriateness. I've thought about Noah and his family closing the door and being sealed inside. I've thought about them hearing the sound of rain and the people banging desperately on those closed doors. I've thought about the cries and the banging becoming quieter and quieter, about the gut-wrenching silence as the voices were swallowed by the sound of rain.

In a recent essay on her blog, *Life is a Sacred Text*, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg notes that while the Bible calls Noah a "righteous man, blameless in his generation" (Genesis 6:9), the Zohar, a Kabbalistic text that first appeared in 13th century Spain, doesn't see him so favorably. The author ties him not to the survival of the animals but to the deaths of everyone else. "Noah did not plea for mercy on behalf of the world, and they all perished, because the Holy One ... had told him that he and his children would be saved by the ark" (Zohar 1:67b). Noah's complicity in the people's deaths is so bad that, in Isaiah, the floodwaters are named after him: "For this is as the *waters of Noah* to me; as I have sworn that the *waters of Noah* should no more go over the earth" (Isaiah 54:9, emphasis mine).

I've wondered if this story that celebrates obedience immunizes us to the suffering of others—if it teaches us to see suffering as proof of God's judgment. Just following orders is no excuse. Neither is thinking you are chosen. Was Noah just following orders? Why was there no haggling to look for a few righteous inhabitants of the Earth? Why was Noah silent before God at the end of the world?

TRUSTING GOD ENOUGH TO ARGUE

When faced with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham argued with God. *Will you kill the righteous with the wicked? Will you really kill them even if there are only 50 righteous people? 45? 40? 30? 20? 10?* And God agreed: If there were 10 righteous people, God would not destroy the city (Genesis 18:22-33). Unfortunately for Sodom, there were not even 10. God destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, but not for Abraham's lack of trying to stop it.

When faced with the destruction of the Israelites, Moses, too, argued with God. When he lingered too long on Mount Sinai (Exodus 32:4), the people got impatient. They formed for themselves a golden calf, sacrificing burnt offerings to it. God threatened to destroy them in anger, but Moses pushed back. He didn't argue that the people were innocent—their betrayal of God was clear. Instead, Moses pointed to God's promise to the people to be inheritors of the land. He appealed to God's trustworthiness.

But when presented with the people's coming destruction, Noah was silent. He built his ark and put up with the nonsense of those around him who thought he was being foolish. Then he packed up his family, inventoried the animals, and let God seal him in. Did he do all that he could?

Have we?

My people, the Anishinaabe, have a similar story. The people have not been behaving well. They are greedy and selfish and hurting each other. Their lives are badly out of balance and this imbalance is getting close to causing irreparable harm to the Earth itself. So Creator, the Great Mystery, decides to start over. Eagle asks for time, time to find someone, anyone, who is living in a good way. Creator agrees to wait, and day after day Eagle flies, until finally she finds a family: One family who is praying. She carries word of this family back to Creator, her feathers falling to the earth because she has worn herself out so badly. Creator relents and the world is spared—all because Eagle risked arguing with Creator.

The Israelites were spared because Moses risked arguing with God. But most of us church people don't argue with God. We don't argue with our theology. We don't argue with our teachers. Not for the sake of others, at least. We'll argue because the pews are too hard or too soft or because we didn't like the worship songs. We'll argue over any number of things that inconvenience us,

but we don't argue about the things that *convenience* us. The Western church is too convinced of its status—of its chosenness—and so, like Noah, it preaches to the lost but does not argue about the pending judgment. In fact, I dare say that there is a certain frisson of excitement about that judgment, about being on the inside of that door when it finally slams shut, knowing that if people are outside, it's their own fault.

WHO IS CHOSEN?

In its earliest years, the church was formed in the context of Roman persecution—many of the letters in the New Testament reflect that. But by the 5th century CE, the church was Rome. Its center, its home, was no longer in Jerusalem but in the seat of the Roman Empire.

The church's foundational texts spoke of persecution, but for a thousand years the church was in a position of power and the meaning of persecution necessarily began to shift. From positions of dominance, one sect of Christians "persecuted" other sects of Christians. Rather than the powerful often persecuting the powerless, they fought over doctrine. It was this zeal for what they considered "pure" theology that European Christians brought with them when they arrived in a world they called new. A world filled with people who made no sense to them, people who did not share their creation story. Willie James Jennings describes the work of the 16th century Jesuit theologian José de Acosta, who articulated a new vision of what he considered Christian persecution and suffering: living with what he saw as the moral, spiritual, and intellectual weaknesses of Indigenous peoples. Persecution came to mean what it meant

When presented
with the people's
coming destruction,
Noah was silent.



to Noah: living amid the jeering of those who didn't believe.

The Protestant churches in the English colonies and the Catholic churches in the Spanish colonies saw themselves as God's chosen people and North America as a promised land filled with hope and opportunity (and with human beings they did not consider people). In *The Baptism of Early Virginia*, Rebecca Anne Goetz notes that preachers such as Rev. William Symonds, who preached in the early 17th century, compared the English colonists to Abraham and his people. God, Symonds said, "had promised to make Abraham a great nation, and he would do the same for 'all that are of his faith and obedience.'"

But it was Noah that the colonists acted most like. Abraham, moving into a new place, understood that he was a guest and, imperfect as he was, trusted God enough to argue with God on behalf of the original inhabitants. Western Christians neither see themselves as guests in this place nor do they argue with a theological tradition that elevates them over others.

When I mentioned this to my mother—about my amazement at Noah's silence now that I noticed it—she remarked that maybe Noah didn't trust God. Noah certainly believed that God would do what God said. But believing and trusting are not the same thing. Noah was blameless and upright,



but his relationship with God was tentative and unsure. Trusting relationships are built through what therapists call rupture and repair: People argue and make up and they learn to trust each other. Noah had not learned to trust God.

The earliest colonists also had a problem with trust. They believed themselves to be chosen by God. Coincidentally, the “chosen of God,” in their view, were mostly white Europeans, which made it easy to tell at a glance who was chosen and who was not, who had the right to own land and who did not, who could vote and who could not, who could be bought and sold or killed for their land and who could not. They believed they were chosen, but what if they had trusted?

What if they had trusted that God had a hand in the “New World” itself and not just in their voyage? What if they considered the possibility that the Indigenous people may have had good news *for them*? What if they had heard the similarities in some of our cosmology—the Anishinaabe creation story has some marked similarities to the one in the Bible—and saw this as evidence of relationship rather than apostasy? Trusting God can be frightening, particularly when God asks you to leave Ur of the Chaldeans and follow God to a new place. But Abram was met by Melchizedek; to these colonist Abrahams, we were only Canaanites.

In his book *Stamped from the Beginning*, Ibram X. Kendi writes about the theology that the original colonists developed because they did not think of themselves as white. They thought of themselves as Christian, which became complicated when the people they enslaved also became Christians, since early laws about slavery prevented the enslavement of Christians.

A theology of “equal souls and unequal bodies” was developed by men such as William Perkins, who preached in the late 16th century and was followed by Richard Mather and John Cotton. The enslaved could be converted, but they remain enslaved because they remained Black. Richard Mather’s grandson, Cotton Mather, built on this, writing that although their skin remained Black, their souls would turn white as snow. People could continue to be bought and sold, killed and displaced, based on skin color and race. Horrors would follow: the ethnic cleansing of the land east of the Mississippi via the various trails of tears; the ethnic cleansing of the West via the Indian Wars; reservations; boarding

The church's
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was in a position
of power.

schools; Reconstruction and Jim Crow; race riots and massacres.

We need to admit that these things—slavery and ethnic cleansing—are a legacy of the white colonizing church.

**NOAH AND THE
WHITE CHURCH**

The white colonizing church arrived in the Americas claiming to speak for God. Many of its current-day members, like Noah, greet the end of our world not with arguments, but by preaching their version of salvation and believing themselves to be persecuted because not everyone agrees with them.

This church builds arks on stolen land—suburban enclaves protected by neighborhood watches and prisons. Through it all, this church has not heard the banging on the door. Or if it *has* heard the desperate pleas of those who are racially marginalized, this church, assured of its own righteousness, comforts itself with the knowledge that these people who have been pushed to the margins deserve it—that their destruction is the result of their own poor choices. This church offers charity, but not change. It offers to make souls white as snow without acknowledging how and why marginalized people exist in the world.

The white colonizing church rarely argues with its assumptions about God

or the authority it has taken upon itself. Both Protestants and Catholics developed a theology they could *believe*. They created a theology of hierarchy and power that justified enslavement and declared the land to be empty. We need the Abrahams and Moseses to stand in front of the powers that promise the people's destruction and trust that God has our back when we say: What about them?

But too often the people of this white church remain silent, like Noah. Untrusting. Like Noah, they may worry that if they argue they will find themselves outside as well. So rather than wrestling with the theology that permitted horrors, they claim that specific harms such as slavery and residential schools were the result of “bad Christians” or people who “aren’t really Christians.” This is lazy and irresponsible. Even if your church didn’t actively participate in oppression, the theology it rests on didn’t put up any argument against it.

The world created by the white colonizing church is one in which most Christians are safe. We sing songs and rely on Bible commentaries from those eras. Jim Crow and Indian boarding schools aren’t that long ago. Ruby Bridges, that little girl who had to be escorted to school by U.S. Marshals, is only 67 years old today. Some of those who opposed her are elders in our churches; they preach in our pulpits.

These are our relationships and our ancestors. I am in no position to sit in judgment over whether they are real Christians, whatever that means. It feels good to distance myself from participation in dominating others, but it’s not that distant, not when we still sing songs about being slaves to fear or having our souls made white as snow.

I am Anishinaabe and Ukrainian; my ancestry is both here and elsewhere. My inheritance is both Indigenous and settler. I grew up in the church, and so that too is where my relatives are, my ancestors. I have a responsibility to *all* my relatives: To not remain silent. To speak, though my voice shakes. To argue with those who claim to speak for God at the end of our world. ❖

Patty Krawec (@gindaanis), an Anishinaabe woman from Lac Seul First Nation, co-hosts the podcast *Medicine for the Resistance*. You can find more of her writing at pattykrawec.substack.com. She lives in Niagara Falls, Ontario.

'TRUTH CRUSHED TO EARTH WILL RISE AGAIN'



One month after thousands of white nationalist men and women stormed the U.S. Capitol while attempting a coup d'état under Trump flags—resulting in the deaths of five people and assaults on 140 police officers—former President Trump's second impeachment trial began. In the opening

arguments, House impeachment managers rolled the tape, illuminating the truth of the horrors of Jan. 6, 2021.

The evidence presented for impeaching Trump was overwhelming, though many leading GOP members turned their eyes, busied themselves, and refused to reck-

on with reality. House Democrats voted unanimously for impeachment, and 10 Republicans joined them, making it the most bipartisan vote of its kind in U.S. history. While 57 senators found Trump guilty of "incitement of insurrection," Trump was acquitted—even though the majority of

A year after the Jan. 6 attack, truth is still a rare—and essential—commodity.

BY Lisa Sharon Harper
ILLUSTRATION BY Máximo Tuja



senators found him guilty of leading a coup against the United States.

That vote revealed a fundamental malformation in our national governance. It is not new. It has been with us from the beginning—from the days when my ninth-great-grandmother, Fortune, was sen-

tenced to indentured service, even though the Maryland race law that she was born under had been successfully challenged. The law changed after she was born, yet a judge—an arbiter of what is supposed to be true and just in our nation—bent the truth of the law to sentence her to generations of

powerlessness, exploitation, and rape that she (and we) should not have had to endure.

From the beginning, our nation has bent, twisted, and buried truth in service to European, then white, supremacy. It has hidden its addiction to human hierarchy—the supremacy of white maleness

and pure power. White male addiction to pure power crushed the opportunities for my ancestors Willa and Lizzie and Henry and Reinaldo and Austin to flourish. They were forced to contort themselves into the small boxes set for them. By law, Willa and Lizzie could only be housemaids or field hands in South Carolina. They were likely assaulted by men in the houses where they served, according to the family story, and the souls of successive generations were gashed by both structural and interpersonal white male lust for power.

Over four years of the Trump administration, the world witnessed GOP senators—the vast majority Southern and white—run rehearsed plays for power: They projected their own sin onto their perceived opponents; they narrowed their lenses to a pinpoint in a wide panorama of sin; and rather than judging based on merit, they claimed foul on the other side—based on technicalities. In the end, these political tactics suppressed legislators’ consciences.

Historian Keisha N. Blain said that the failure to convict Trump “reveals that violence and white supremacy will continue to shape American politics—as they have since the nation’s founding.”

TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

When I was a child, I loved the television game show *Truth or Consequences*. Every week contestants were challenged to answer questions truthfully. If their answer was incorrect, they would have to accept the consequences.

As an evangelical I was taught to value truth and the authority of scripture. I was taught there are ultimate consequences for all who do not abide by the truth. I was taught Jesus is the truth itself. But the heritage of white evangelicalism in the U.S. stretches back through Jim Crow segregation to antebellum and colonial slavery to “praying towns” and the Pequot Massacre. All of these regimes required fascist, authoritarian leadership—leadership that always unites racism, nationalism, hard patriarchy, and lies. People of African descent in the U.S. understand fascism intimately. In Rev. King’s last book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* he wrote, “The segregationist goal is the total reversal of all reforms, with reestablishment of naked oppression and, if need be, a native form of fascism.”

African Americans were stunned but not baffled on Jan. 6 when we, along with the rest of the world, witnessed the noose

erected by Trump supporters in the crowd outside the Capitol, the Confederate flag moving through the halls of Congress, and the lynch mob searching for Nancy Pelosi—the Catholic woman, third in line to the presidency, who defied and helped dethrone their symbol of white male power.

The 2020 presidential election and Trump’s second impeachment acquittal were revelations. They revealed the extent to which our nation is rejecting both truth and consequences.



NO JUSTICE IS POSSIBLE UNTIL WE RECKON WITH THE TRUTH OF WHAT HAPPENED.

The apostle Paul lists lying as one of a handful of sins worthy of hell. Lies break and block peace from entering the world. They sow confusion and obstruct the reign of God, which is characterized by shalom. At the heart of shalom is truth. Truth-telling and integrity are basic requirements for healthy relationships. Without truth, trust is broken. Without trust, relationships are broken—individual, communal, and systemic relationships.

OUR NARRATIVE GAP

In **Danielle Sered’s** book *Until We Reckon: Violence, Mass Incarceration, and a Road to Repair*, she writes, “Acts of individual and structural harm are meaningfully different, but the key elements of accountability—acknowledging responsibility for one’s actions, acknowledging the impact of one’s actions on others, expressing genuine remorse, taking actions to repair the harm to the

degree possible, and no longer committing similar harm—apply to both.”

She issues this challenge: “Just as we ask people who cause interpersonal violence to reckon with their actions, so should we as a society call on ourselves to reckon, too. Until we do, no different future will be possible.”

Perhaps the highest point of American consciousness during the Trump administration came the day its members ordered National Guard troops to shoot projectiles into a peacefully protesting crowd

assembled outside the White House to clear space for Trump to walk across the street and stand in front of a church he did not attend to hold a Bible that wasn’t his own for a photo op. In that moment, Trump showed the world what American fascism looks like.

We saw who we are and realized we can choose the nation we will be. There is only one condition: We must reckon with the nation we have been—all of it. This requires truth. We must search for the truth. We must listen to the truth. We must tell the truth.

There is a narrative gap in our nation. Wide is the distance between the stories we tell about ourselves and the actual truth of how we got here and who we are. The gap is the distance between “Make America Great Again” and Martin Luther King Jr.’s “dream” of the beloved community.

If one’s story of America is grounded in the myth of Manifest Destiny and John Winthrop’s “city upon a hill,” then one’s vi-

sion of the future erases, justifies, and spins the sin and oppression that made white American prosperity possible—stolen land, free labor, rape to breed more free labor, and continued exploitation of non-whites to protect one's destiny on the hill.

But if your story of America is shaped by the dream of the beloved community, then your vision of the future struggles forward toward a common peace and common justice that our nation has never seen. Our narratives shape our politics—our conversations and decisions about how the *polis* (the people) should live together.

Narrative shapes worldview.

TRUTH-SEEKING AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Shrinking the narrative gap is the first step of transitional justice—the process of transforming a society steeped in oppression into a just democracy. To do this, we must seek the truth, listen to the truth, and tell the truth.

Truth-seeking is a spiritual practice. It requires one to admit they do not already possess the whole truth. They have need. There are things they don't know—things that matter. Truth-seeking requires humility. Humility sees the image of God in the other, the inherent dignity of the other, the mind of the other, the heart of the other—and it respects the will of the other. The practice of humility is the first act of repair. For it was the absence of humility that broke the relationship between people of European descent and the colonized world to begin with. It was the assumption that all who are not like the self are not fully human, not called by God to exercise agency, not capable of stewarding the world. Humility is an act of repentance. Practicing humility heals the European soul.

Truth-listening begins the process of peeling back the death grip of spin and false narratives. Truth-listening leans in. It centers the narratives that rise from the margins and recognizes the expertise of those most affected by oppression. Drawing from humility, truth-listening steps back and invites the other forward. It recognizes the other's divine call to help steward the guiding story and lay foundations for the guiding vision.

Truth-telling fans the flames of human agency, giving democracy breath and citizens in a democracy the ability to govern themselves toward just peace. It fills the narrative gap with perspective and details usually erased. Truth-telling moves us from

the realm of ideas and grounds the transformative process in the reality of what happened. No justice is possible until we reckon with the truth of what happened.

Truth-seeking, truth-listening, and truth-telling are critical to the process of re-membering public memory—reuniting public memory that has been disjointed and dismembered by spin and justification.

The Bible compiles narratives of the oppressed to establish a common public memory. From its first page to its last, more than 40 authors from a serially colonized and enslaved people attempt to establish common public memory in a context that breeds fragmentation. While they could have cordoned off the storytelling and story-listening within their own community, the biblical writers often invite immigrants and adopted members to share their common memory as an act of confession of truth that leads to communion.

EXCAVATING OUR OWN STORIES

A key strategy of white supremacy is to dismember, warp, and erase the memories of peoples of European descent. People deemed “white” in the United States have forgotten who they really are. They have forgotten their own histories of oppression and degradation in Europe. They have forgotten why and how they came to this land.

God charges the Hebrews again and again to remember that they were once enslaved in Egypt. This is the source of their humility—this is their grounding memory. People of European descent in the U.S. lack such humility because they lack such memory.

They have come to believe they are actually white, but whiteness is a phantom. It is not real. It is constructed by governments and entrenched by common lived experience in relationship to public policy and the cultural mores that grow around them. Whiteness has no common struggle, no common people, no common story.

Rather, it floats like a figment, elusive and yet claimed at the same time. Myths and lies are its foundation and beams. And all truth that threatens the constitution of the house called “whiteness” is eradicated in service to pure power ... and the promise of it.

People of European descent have work to do. They must dismantle the myths of their identity and reckon with their actual origin stories. There is no more powerful

way to do this than through the process of uncovering family history.

Family stories uncover the things that happened—our untold origin stories that root us in actual time and place and peoples. They have the power to tell us who we really are and how we really got here. They have the power to show us the moment of the break—the moment we were broken and the moment we broke others. We cannot repair the collective until we know when and how we broke it.

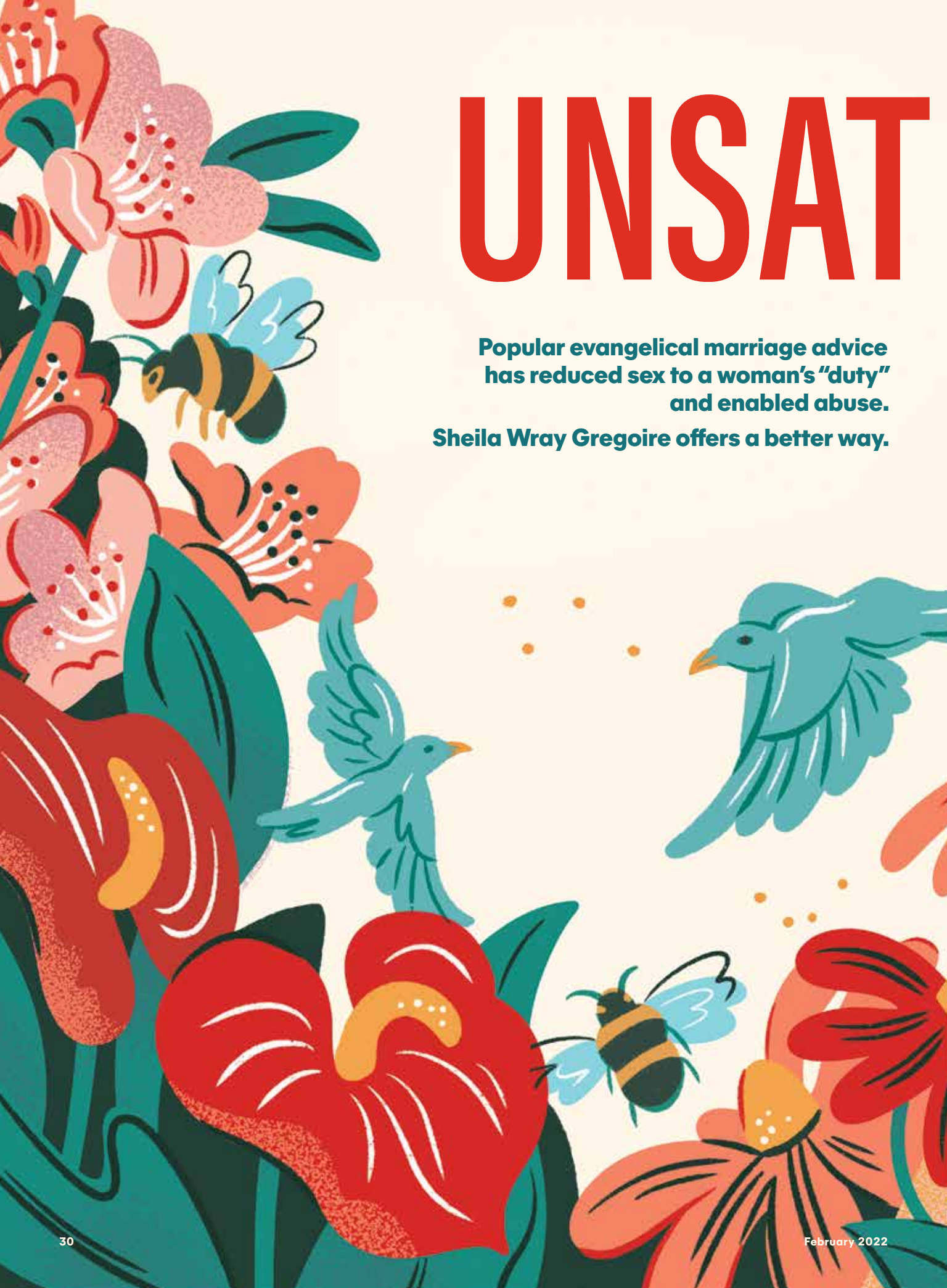
My process of re-membering my family story has been pure revelation. Repair requires truth. Truth does not bow to packaged simplicity. Family stories have the power to subvert fabricated hierarchies of human belonging and ground us again in truth.

On Jan. 6, white nationalists followed Donald Trump's call to march to the Capitol building to stop the process of Congress recognizing states' certified votes. The culture war became actual war—not a spontaneous act, but an organized attack on American democracy that was months in the making. They stormed the Capitol building. They hunted for congressional leaders, saying they wanted to kill them. They ran the Confederate flag through those near-sacred halls. True to King's words, white nationalists attempted to kill democracy because it demanded equality. But they lost.

Twenty days before he died, Martin Luther King Jr. ended his speech at Grosse Pointe (Mich.) High School with a clarion call for the truth to be told: “We shall overcome because Carlyle is right. ‘No lie can live forever.’ We shall overcome because William Cullen Bryant is right. ‘Truth crushed to earth will rise again.’”

There can be no repair of relationship between the oppressed and oppression's beneficiaries without the truth being told. Repair requires repentance. Repentance requires reparation. Reparation is the process of repairing what has been broken through the oppression and subjugation of human dignity. This is how to re-member people and people groups with their own divine call and capacity to steward the world. ✦

Lisa Sharon Harper, a former *Sojourners* columnist, is founder and president of FreedomRoad.us. This article is adapted from *Fortune: How Race Broke My Family and the World—and How to Repair It All* (Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, Feb. 2022, used by permission).



UNSAT

**Popular evangelical marriage advice
has reduced sex to a woman's "duty"
and enabled abuse.**

Sheila Wray Gregoire offers a better way.

ISFIED

**By Krispin
Mayfield**

**Illustration by
Jordan Kay**





Note: This article contains references to sexual trauma.

It wasn't Sheila Wray Gregoire's initial plan to make a career of writing about the intimate lives of evangelicals. But when she began her "mom blog," *To Love, Honor, and Vacuum*, in 2008, she found her readers responded most when she wrote about sex.

Four years later, Gregoire wrote *The Good Girl's Guide to Great Sex* and quickly found herself as a keynote speaker at conferences and churches throughout the United States and her home country, Canada. Recently, with her daughter Rebecca Gregoire Lindenbach and statistician Joanna Sawatsky, she wrote *The Great Sex Rescue: The Lies You've Been Taught and How to Recover What God Intended* to free women from toxic messages about sex and marriage often promoted in the church.

Gregoire told *Sojourners* she initially wasn't aware of how pervasive these toxic teachings were. But after hearing from women that *Love and Respect*, a marriage advice book by popular Christian speaker Emerson Eggerichs (which boasts more than 2 million copies in sales), had been harmful, she read it for herself. She was horrified to find that the entire chapter on sex was addressed solely to women, instructing them to care for their husbands' sexual needs. "Until then, we were working with blinders on as we created helpful resources to improve people's marriages and sex lives," Gregoire wrote in *The Great Sex Rescue*. "Once we read it, we realized that we needed to do far more."

SEX AS CONTROL

As a Christian couples therapist, I've been following Gregoire's work and the backlash she has faced from some conservative evangelical men. Gregoire believes the teachings on women's sexual obligations are due in part to who writes the books

on sex and marriage popular in white evangelical churches: namely men, such as Eggerichs and Gary Thomas, author of *Sacred Marriage*. Other commonly read books are co-authored by couples, such as *The Meaning of Marriage* by Tim and Kathy Keller and *The Act of Marriage* by Tim and Beverly LaHaye.

As Lindenbach told *Sojourners*, "When you look at the best-selling books, when you look at who is running the organizations like Focus [on the Family] and *Christianity Today*, when you look at the people who are the most influential voices in evangelical Christianity, they are [mainly] men." This influences how the church thinks about sex, she explains. "Most of the time, even the women who have influential voices are speaking on behalf of men."

In writing *The Great Sex Rescue*, Gregoire, Lindenbach, and Sawatsky analyzed the popular marriage and sex books commonly read by evangelicals. They began with the top 10 Christian marriage books on Amazon, excluding those that did not significantly discuss sex. They also included other influential Christian books about sex, such as *Every Man's Battle* by Stephen Arterburn and Fred Stoeker, and added a top-selling secular book, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* by John M. Gottman and Nan Silver, for comparison.

While not all the books they reviewed were problematic, several contained harmful messages, such as viewing sex as a physical need only men have, rather than a mutual experience of intimacy, or blaming women for their husbands' pornography use or affairs. Gregoire, Lindenbach, and Sawatsky also found exhortations that wives should maintain their appearance or weight as it was when they got married, arguing that failing to do so would be sinful. Many taught that women were prohibited from saying no to sex unless it was for a time of prayer and fasting approved by the husband. Of all the Christian books studied, none mentioned consent.

Gregoire and her co-authors believe that church teachings on gender roles in marriage have significantly shaped these books. In Lindenbach's summary, the church's message to men has been: "God made you to have sex. Your woman owes you sex. And your job is to be the leader, her boss, her king, and the priest of your family."

In response to the broader society's moves to deemphasize rigid gender stereotypes, roles, and identities, conservative churches and organizations have fought

back by insisting on "traditional" gender roles and differences. Unfortunately, this gender-role framework has fostered transactional—and even coercive—relationships, rather than connection based on mutuality. When relational needs are categorized by gender, such as "women need to talk, men need sex" (a paraphrase of a common teaching in evangelical circles), it fosters emotional distance rather than couples learning to communicate, care for, and connect with one another.

BARING IT ALL

Seeking a more balanced perspective on heterosexual marriage in the church, Gregoire, Lindenbach, and Sawatsky launched a survey initiative in 2019 they called "The Bare Marriage Project," aiming for 10,000 responses. In the end, over 22,000 women responded, more than 75 percent of whom identified as evangelical or had at some point in their life.

"Women were just so happy to finally be able to speak about this," Lindenbach told *Sojourners*. "We were willing to listen. And I think that's why we had such an amazing turnout."

To ensure they weren't just pulling from the readership of Gregoire's book and website, they recruited through multiple avenues. More than half of the respondents came through these other sources.

The survey asked about adherence to beliefs such as "The only biblical reason for divorce is an affair," and "a wife is obligated to give her husband sex when he wants it." They found that these beliefs and others corresponded with both lower satisfaction in marriage and lower satisfaction with sex life.

Sixteen percent of respondents reported feeling used after sex. Grappling with that number, I pictured the church sanctuaries I've sat in, now knowing that more than one in 10 women in those pews likely often or always feel exploited by sex. Gregoire found that the reasons for what she terms "obligation sex" range from feeling guilty for saying no, to being treated badly for saying no, to feeling responsible for ensuring their husband doesn't look at pornography or have an affair if they say no. In *The Great Sex Rescue*, the authors reference a spousal contract called the "Sexual Refusal Commitment" that was presented at a major Christian conference in 2000. The document states: "I no longer have authority over my own body, but my spouse does," with a reference to 1 Corinthians 7:4. Sawatsky told *Sojourners* in response: "We are left with the horrifying

conclusion that abusive husbands seem to be bringing their wives Christian resources that tell women that if they won't have sex, they are in sin. ... Abusive men are using our evangelical resources as weapons."

THE GOD WHO SEES

Gregoire references the story of Hagar, a woman who did not have the ability to consent to sex and who is abused further after she gives birth to Ishmael. God meets Hagar in the desert, and Hagar—a woman who has been sexually assaulted—is the first person to name God. She calls God "the God who sees me" (Genesis 16:13).

Christian marriage and sex books do not often discuss rape, but *The Great Sex Rescue* tackles it head-on. "Nothing could have prepared us for how many horrific stories of marital rape we heard," Gregoire wrote. "When Christian resources fail to discuss marital rape appropriately, it leaves women without the words to describe what is happening to them."

Gregoire and her co-authors analyzed what happens when couples are taught that women don't have sexual needs or that "to set up a marriage with two equals at the head is to set it up for failure"—a direct quote from Eggerichs' *Love and Respect*. They talk

about what happens when church leaders don't teach couples about sexual consent in marriage and found that if women feel they can't say no to sex, it reduces both sexual satisfaction and marital happiness.

Lindenbach said many women wrote to say they have wonderful, responsive husbands, but mentioned things such as "just reading through [the chapter on coercion] made me cry because I realized that even with my marriage, I felt like I couldn't say no, though I've never felt like I needed to."

Two years before publishing *The Great Sex Rescue*, Gregoire wrote a short blog series about Eggerichs' *Love and Respect* after reading it for herself. She received hundreds of comments from women telling stories of how the book was used to enable abuse in their marriages. She, Lindenbach, and Sawatsky created a report summarizing the comments they received and sent it to Focus on the Family, which published and promoted *Love and Respect*. Focus on the Family and its founder, Dr. James Dobson, have been considered authorities on marriage, raising kids, family life, and more for the evangelical church. The organization hosts a regular program featuring Christian advice on family life.

"I've been featured on the Focus on the Family broadcast three times," Gregoire

wrote in *The Great Sex Rescue*, "I honestly thought they would listen." Instead, they released a statement characterizing Gregoire's critiques as a "concerted campaign against the book" and asserted "that *Love and Respect* has a biblically sound, empowering message for husbands and wives." Gregoire also received criticism from Mark Gungor, producer of the *Laugh Your Way to a Better Marriage* curriculum used in churches throughout the nation and customized for use in the U.S. military. Gungor called Gregoire "the patron saint of sexually unfulfilled women." She wrote in response in her Twitter bio, "I take it as a compliment!"

ROBBED OF GOOD SEX

Erin Gentry grew up in a nondenominational church and has been married for more than a decade to her husband, whom she met at a Christian private school. She said she's "felt robbed of truly good sex," attributing this largely to teachings on "gender roles, the pressure on women to be the gatekeepers of purity premarriage and endlessly available sex receptacles after the wedding," and "from being told—maybe not in so many words—if your husband looks at porn, it's your fault."

Reflecting on what she's learned from Gregoire's writing, she recognizes that what she was taught about sex growing up in the church has kept her from "feeling free and safe to express and explore sexuality within a marriage relationship." She said Gregoire has been instrumental in helping her untangle the "complicated and often damaging messaging from so-called Christian marriage resources."

Amy Knöttner, who grew up in a fundamentalist Christian community, said that Gregoire's work has been "reprogramming [her] entire understanding of male-female relationships." She deftly identifies the draw to these rigid approaches to relationships: "There's some safety in feeling like I know what my job is—how to protect my marriage, how to protect my husband from the 'darkness of the world.'" The rules she was taught promised a level of security she found comforting—even if they didn't deliver. To this day, it's still tempting to believe that she alone is responsible for her husband's purity. "But if that's not true," she says with a tone of hope, "then we have a lot more life, and love, and liberty than I thought possible."

Gregoire, Lindenbach, and Sawatsky want to conduct research to better serve people in the church, and they've already submitted their survey results to a



Sixteen percent
of respondents
reported feeling
used after sex.

database for use in peer-reviewed research. As a couples therapist, I appreciate their concern for getting the right data because it's easy for therapists or pastors to have inflated assumptions about the effectiveness of our counsel. It's crucial to find out what's really working and what's not. They also will continue to rely on the peer-reviewed research of others. "If you look at the best-selling books on marriage," remarks Lindenbach, "of the 13 evangelical books that we looked at, there were only 11 peer-reviewed citations. Not per book—11 across the board."

Just as Gregoire invites other Christian writers to reconsider their approaches to sex, she's modeling it herself as she continues to gather data. She published *The Good Girl's Guide to Great Sex* in 2012 but is currently rewriting it, informed by her new research. "This is not just revised," she says. "Let's torch the old one, because my ways of thinking about this have totally changed."

The new version will be available in March 2022 alongside *The Good Guy's Guide to Great Sex*—a new book for men, also informed by survey data. Ultimately, Gregoire hopes that writing about sex and relationships will lead to intimacy, mutuality, equality, and emotional health for couples and get churches talking about consent and abuse in marriage.

Gregoire dedicated *The Great Sex Rescue* to "Aunt Matilda," a woman briefly mentioned in a vignette in the LaHayes' *The Act of Marriage*, published nearly half a century ago. In their book, the LaHayes recount the story of a woman who tells a young bride to expect marriage to be a continual experience of "legalized rape." The LaHayes criticize Matilda for telling the young bride that sex is unenjoyable and frame Matilda's husband and rapist as "embarrassed," "clumsy," and, worst of all, "equally unhappy." Rather than naming the sexual assault for what it is, the LaHayes blame Aunt Matilda for talking about it. The story of Aunt Matilda stuck with Gregoire as a prime example of how the church has responded to women's abuse in marriage. Gregoire's dedication reads: "To *The Act of Marriage's* Aunt Matilda, and all the women like her. We see you. We hear you. And we are so, so sorry." ♦

Krispin Mayfield is a licensed therapist in Portland, Ore., and author of *Attached to God: A Practical Guide to Deeper Spiritual Experience* (February 2022).

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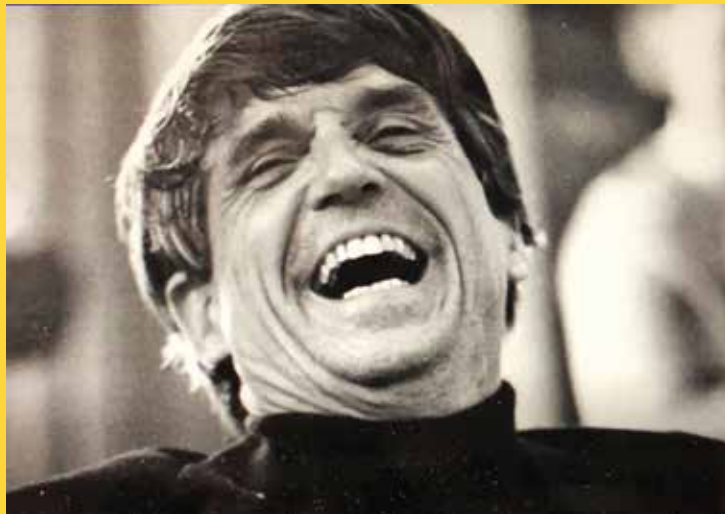
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DANIEL BERRIGAN SPOKE JUST ONE WORD IN ROLAND JOFFÉ'S MOVIE *THE MISSION*: “NO.” BUT HIS “YES” TO LAUGHTER AND DELIGHT ARE THE GREATER PART OF HIS LEGACY.

By Joyce Hollyday



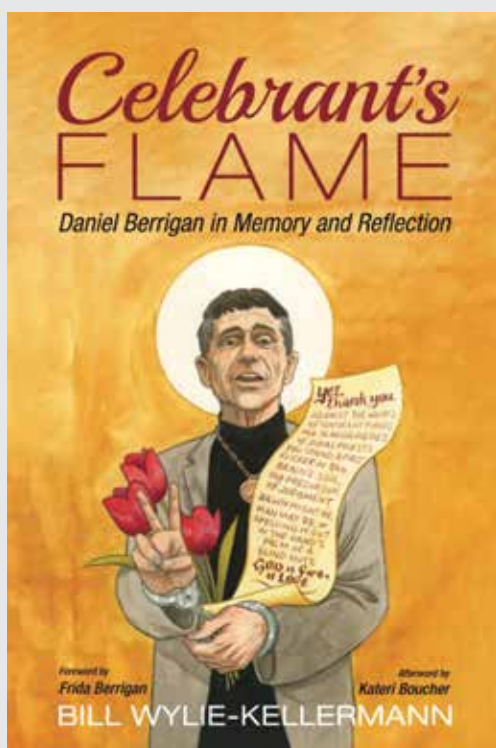
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Four decades ago, when I was a young editor at *Sojourners*, Daniel Berrigan wrote a poem for a special edition of the magazine. The note accompanying it read: “Here’s the poem—my first on a word processor. Seems a bit jumbled. Might have got a food processor by mistake.”

Book

Berrigan has been described often as poet, prophet, and priest. The note reveals another alliterative trio that marked his life: humor, hu-

mility, and hospitality. Though I never saw him use a food processor, over the years I enjoyed several delectable dinners he whipped up in his apartment in New York City and his cottage on Block Island, accompanied by his droll wit. Berrigan was engaged in an unflinching, lifelong face-down with the world—observing its worst inhumanities and fully understanding its



unlimited capacities for destruction—but he also knew how to be tickled by joy.

Bill Wylie-Kellermann is among those in Berrigan's close circle who feasted regularly at his table, drawing sustenance from the food, lively conversation, and prophetic insights. *Celebrant's Flame: Daniel Berrigan in Memory and Reflection* (Cascade Books) is Wylie-Kellermann's moving tribute to the man who was first his professor, then his mentor, and ultimately his beloved friend. It is a treasure trove of poems and letters, sermons and speeches, reflections and court testimonies, even a seminary paper—a patchwork sewn into a beautiful whole.

Any book about Berrigan must necessarily address the realities that seared his soul: nuclear weapons, racism and poverty, South Africa's apartheid and Israel's occupation of Palestine, the Vietnam War and its many successors. The gift of Wylie-Kellermann's book is that it weaves among these the touches of humanity and humor that made Berrigan such good company. My favorite is a series of questions from one of Berrigan's early "final exams" as a Jesuit professor, a whimsical jab at academia. A brief sampling:

*How many different ways can you spell Schillibex?
Reflect on the Seven Deadly Sins. Describe how you have
integrated these in your life.
If the headquarters of the western church are at Geneva
and Rome, where are its hind quarters? Illustrate.*

**BERRIGAN KNEW
HOW TO BE TICKLED
BY JOY.**

Wylie-Kellermann has arranged *Celebrant's Flame* to reflect the wholeness of Berrigan's life, each chapter devoted to one of the gifts he offered to the world. These embrace the familiar, above-mentioned identities of poet, prophet, and priest—and of course, prisoner. During one of many stretches of incarceration for acts of conscience, Berrigan wrote that he had been "appointed Laureat[e] in Residence at the Imperial Madhouse, Woebegone Acres." And he once commented to his friend and biographer Jim Forest, "I should have gone to prison sooner. It's a pressure cooker of poetry."

The book also delves into his more personal roles as friend and sibling, particularly the mutually inspiring relationship between him and younger brother Philip. It includes lesser-known aspects of his life as well, such as his faithful, compassionate presence with people suffering from AIDS and terminal cancer (see the May 2021 issue of *Sojourners*). And it explores what Wylie-Kellermann calls Berrigan's discipline as a "biblical contemplative," meditating "with one eye on the book and the other on the world."

Berrigan's place of retreat was the Block Island cottage, perched on a bluff high above crashing waves off the coast of Rhode Island. It sat at the edge of the property of his dear friend, lawyer-theologian William Stringfellow. After being convicted for burning draft files in Catonsville, Md., in 1968, Berrigan slipped away under the noses of federal marshals who were poised to take him to jail—making his getaway during a public festival inside an 8-foot-tall puppet of one of Jesus' disciples. For five months he eluded the authorities, earning a place on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list, until he was picked up on the island by FBI agents posing as birdwatchers.

Berrigan was generous with the cottage, making it available to family members and friends, as well as people just released from prison or suffering from illness. I happened to be there when Hurricane Bob hit Block Island in August 1991. Salt spray lashed the shore, and pelting rain washed away a piece of the bluff. I feared the gales would break the windows—or blow the little cottage into the sea. It seemed fitting that this was Berrigan's refuge: a place of rest, prayer, and inspiration, **cont'd on page 41**

DRAMATIC HEALING

By Abby Olcese

In *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary*, Frederick Buechner writes of the power of art, "If we are to love our neighbors, before doing anything else we must see our neighbors. With our imagination as well as our eyes ... like artists, we must see not just their faces but the life behind and within their faces." All art can be a sacred space to share an artist's experiences and needs. At its very best, it can generate empathy and healing.

In the new Netflix documentary *Procession*, filmmaker Robert Greene works with adult survivors of sexual abuse by Catholic priests, as well as trauma-trained advocates and therapists. The six men featured in the film collaboratively create dramatic scenes to process physical, emotional, and spiritual traumas. Their journey highlights the value of supportive communities, and the restorative potential of creative expression.

Though directed by Greene, *Procession* is credited as "a film by" everyone involved. Top billing goes to the men whose stories the film highlights: Joe Eldred, Mike Foreman, Ed Gavagan, Dan Laurine, Michael Sandridge, and Tom Viviano. While Greene may be the one behind the camera, ownership of the film belongs to the subjects.

There's never a question about the ethical implications of this project. It is evident that great care was taken. We witness these men's courage as they work through their traumas together. In some cases, the men revisit the site of their assault for the sake of closure. In others, there are honest conversations about the injustices vis-

ited on these men by the Catholic Church and their long-term effects.

In the film's most stunning act, three of the survivors willingly don vestments to portray abusive clergy in scenes staged by the other men. These moments reclaim the symbolic power of items associated with harm, but also highlight incredible selflessness. When asked why he's taken on the role of a priest for Gavagan's scene, Sandridge responds "Because Ed asked me to." Sandridge knows this will help his friend, and that he's strong enough to take on that duty.

Procession provides a carefully constructed platform for these men to express their fears, pain, and reactions to what was done to them. This is art that invites us, as Buechner says, to see the lives behind our neighbors' faces. How might we listen to those who have been harmed, lament together, and create communities that help us move forward in love? ♦

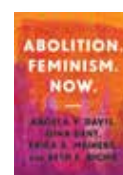
Abby Olcese (@abbyolcese) is a freelance film critic and writer based in Kansas.

From *Procession*

CLASSROOM CHANGEMAKERS

Homeroom, the final documentary film chapter of the *Oakland* trilogy, features Oakland (Calif.) High School's class of 2020 as they organize to remove police officers from their school and navigate remote learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Concordia Studio/Open'hood



Getting to the Roots

In *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*, Angela Y. Davis, Gina Dent, Erica R. Meiners, and Beth E. Richie trace the feminist roots of prison abolition and show the connections between state and interpersonal gender-based and sexual violence. Together, they invite us to cultivate collective change.

Haymarket Books



The Cost of Care

Faced with overwhelming medical debt after an attempted suicide, Emily Maloney took a job as an emergency room technician and saw the other side of the American medical system. Her essays, *Cost of Living*, unpack and indict our greed-driven care industry.

Henry Holt & Co.

CAROLINE'S INFERNO

By Faith-Marie
Zamblé



Curated

"Nothing ever happen under ground in Louisiana / Cause they ain't no under ground in Louisiana. / There is only / under water." With these words, playwright Tony Kushner draws us

into the conundrum at the heart of the musical *Caroline, or Change*: How do you swim when you're already so far below sea level? Caroline Thibodeaux (played by Sharon D Clarke in Roundabout Theatre Company's Broadway revival production) is our eponymous anti-heroine, a 39-year-old maid and divorced mother of four, trying desperately to answer this question in every area of her life.

Based in part on Kushner's own childhood, *Caroline, or Change* speaks through the sounds of Motown, gospel, klezmer, and blues—handily packaged by composer Jeanine Tesori—to tell the story of an uneasy friendship between Caroline and her employer's son, 8-year-old Noah Gellman. The Gellman home becomes a larger metaphor for a country stratified by a brutal socioeconomic caste system, emphasized in the staging by a multilevel set. The structure of 1960s America is made visible, placing each character in predetermined roles, and thus unable to truly see each other.

In a different play, the Gellmans' Jewish heritage and Caroline's Blackness would be a source of solidarity. But, as the play progresses, irreconcilable divisions emerge between Caroline's life and the Gellmans' middle-class woes, bracketed by those ever-present stairs. The conflict comes to a partial head when Rose, Noah's stepmother, decides that Caroline can keep any money she finds in Noah's pockets while doing laundry. At first, this is fun for Noah, who is fascinated

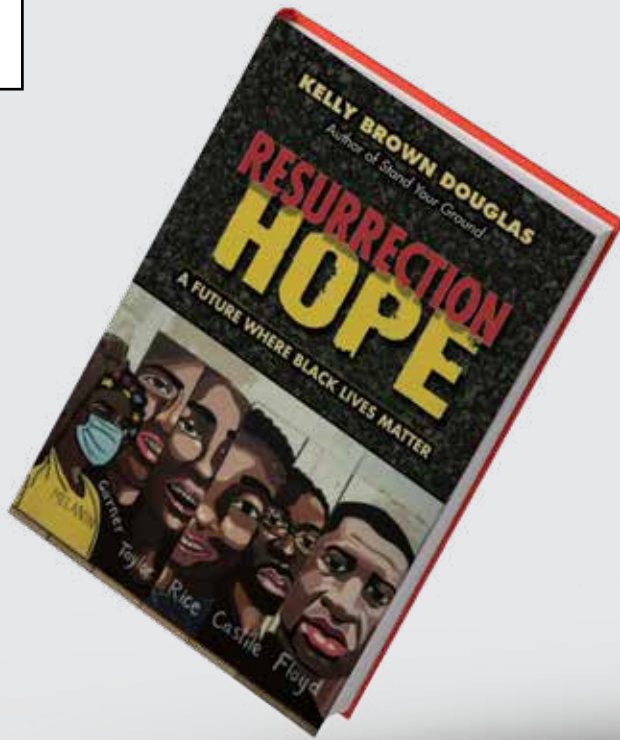
**NOT ALL ROOMS ARE CREATED EQUAL,
NOR THE DREAMS THEY INSPIRE.**

by Caroline's inscrutability. That is, until Noah's Hanukkah gift (\$20) winds up in the bleach cup where the lost coins go. In a depressing showdown, Caroline and Noah trade antisemitic and anti-Black epithets before walking away, ashamed. Caroline initially quits her job; when she returns, she names for Noah the distance that was always between them.

It's fitting that the basement is where this collision takes place, peeling back facades of deference and niceness—to reveal thinly veiled violence and chaos. Gaston Bachelard writes about similar affects in his seminal text, *The Poetics of Space*. He suggests that our homes shape us both imperceptibly and irrevocably. Of course, as one might guess, not all rooms are created equal, nor the dreams they inspire. The cellar gets especially rough treatment from Bachelard, who calls attention to its "buried madness" and "walled-in tragedy." The walled-in tragedy is the economic reality that forces Caroline to fight with a child over money. The tragedy is a world that keeps asking Caroline to change—to soften—without giving her much proof that it will improve.

As I left the theater, I kept wondering about the musical's ethos. Asking someone to bend toward hope when her hope has been shattered so many times seems cruel and quixotic. But as we turn to a new year, the possibility of hope remains vital. I'm not sure yet how we hold onto dreams for a just future when injustice is built into the very architecture of this country. Perhaps we sing to each other when speaking holds no more weight. We try to look ourselves in the eye. We extend grace even when it's inadequate. We might do as Caroline's daughter does, toppling Confederate idols in secret. Most importantly, maybe we try to create a world where our comfort does not require anyone's debasement. ✕

Faith-Marie Zamblé is an artist, writer, and M.F.A. candidate in dramaturgy and dramatic criticism at the Yale School of Drama.



BLACK PROTEST AS RESURRECTION

Resurrection Hope: A Future Where Black Lives Matter,
by Kelly Brown Douglas

Orbis Books

Kelly Brown Douglas (*The Black Christ*) is known for widening the circle for disinherited people to identify with the Black Jesus of her mentor, James H. Cone. In *Resurrection Hope*, Douglas wrestles with how ongoing Black suffering challenges her faith, sparked by questions her adult son asks when yet another Black person is murdered by police or violently assaulted. “How long do we have to wait for the justice of God?” Douglas’ son asks. “I get it, that Christ is Black, but that doesn’t seem to be helping us right now.”

Her son’s visceral theodicy questions cause Douglas to wonder if her Christology of a Black Jesus who identifies with those experiencing “crucifying realities” is enough.

Douglas digs into history and details anti-Black narratives and white supremacy in the very architecture of Christian theology. She traces the development of what W.E.B. Du Bois called “the white gaze.” This white way of knowing “fosters death for Black bodies” by both overt means and the insidious silence of “good white people.”

“REPARATION REMEDIES” ARE IN ORDER IF RACIAL JUSTICE IS EVER TO BE REALIZED IN THE U.S.

Douglas realizes that this “corrupted moral imaginary” of whiteness cannot envision a society where Black lives are equally valued. After all, the idea of “whiteness” was invented to claim biological difference to dominate and subjugate Black bodies for profit. White faith leaders are often silent, she asserts, because the white gaze blocks comprehension that the gospel is built on the paradox of a savior killed by the same kinds of crucifying realities that murder Black people today. Calls for peace and unity are often just a palliative for white discomfort with Black protest. The result of white silence or mere calls for unity is the same as overt racism—maintaining systemic white supremacy.

Douglas calls white clergy to repent and lead in changing the corrupted moral imaginary that grips them, including speaking out proactively against signifiers of white supremacy such as Confederate monuments and police brutality. “Resurrection reparations,” as Douglas calls a range of concrete restorative justice actions, “demand [engagement] in dismantling the legacy of white supremacist policing, for there is no more crucifying reality than this.” This and other “reparation remedies” are in order if racial justice is ever to be realized in the United States.

I read *Resurrection Hope* as a white man who has, over the course of

years, realized that my patriarchal white identity was not only associated with Black death in the past but that I am also complicit in systems that are death-dealing to Black people in the U.S. today. Douglas, a preeminent theologian, does not need my white affirmation. My goal is to encourage other white people to engage with her prophetic word, proactively name and resist white supremacy in church and society, and work humbly for a world where Black lives are truly valued.

Douglas concludes by offering to her son what her ancestors taught her: resilient resistance that lifts resurrection hope in the face of “that which would destroy Black life.” Douglas recalls her great-grandmother Mama Mary, born into slavery, and those who “never drew a free breath,” but had “a hope that was found and lived out in their struggle for freedom—for it was in that struggle that they met God.” ✕

Greg Taylor, founder of the 1256 Movement for reparations to Black families whose homes were burned in the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, lives in Tulsa, Okla.

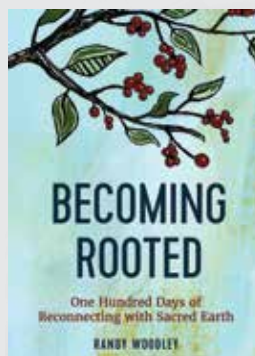
CONNECTING TO CREATION

*A Time to Grow: Lenten Lessons
from the Garden to the Table,*
By Kara Eidson

Westminster John Knox

*Becoming Rooted: One Hundred Days
of Reconnecting with Sacred Earth,*
By Randy Woodley

Broadleaf Books



Devotionals and other daily readings can set and solidify intentions in a new year, enrich liturgical seasons, or serve as a spiritual touchpoint during hectic days. Two new books set out to root such soul work in a deepened relationship with creation. Christian theologian and scholar Randy Woodley is a Cherokee descendant recognized by the Keetoowah Band. He and his wife, Edith, an Eastern Shoshone tribal member, develop and teach sustainable Earth care based on traditional Indigenous practices in North America. Along with skill-sharing, they “hope to help others love the land on which they live.” In *Becoming Rooted: One Hundred Days of Reconnecting with Sacred Earth*, Woodley notes that even those of us who are not Indigenous have ancestors who likely lived somewhere for generations in community with the soil, water, plants, and animals around them.

Woodley has written 100 short daily meditations, each with a suggestion for reflection or action, to encourage all of us to “recover or discover” these values of living in harmony and balance with creation. He draws on Indigenous thought and practice, past pastoral experience, lessons from the natural world, and insightful critiques of the so-called American Dream. Through beautiful descriptions, such as how American violet seeds are dispersed by slugs and ants—“Then in the spring, another field adorns itself with food, medicine, and beauty”—and more somber reflections on the physical and spiritual toll of destructive systems, Woodley models a humble, prophetic invitation: “To accept our place as simple human beings—beings who share a world with every seen and unseen creature in this vast community of creation—is to embrace our deepest spirituality.”

United Methodist pastor Kara Eidson notes that “with my hands in the earth, I feel more deeply connected to creation, and thereby more connected to God, our Creator.” Inspired by that and the centrality of food as

THESE TWO BOOKS REMIND US THAT OUR BODIES AND SOULS ARE INTERTWINED.

sustenance and celebration in the human experience, she has written *A Time to Grow: Lenten Lessons from the Garden to the Table*. This versatile guide can inform worship planning, small group study, or individual reflection and prayer. Eidson offers longer reflections for all the Sundays of Lent and Easter day, plus Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday. Short daily devotionals complete the 40 days of Lent. A closing chapter includes practical resources, including suggestions for congregation-wide Lenten activities, sermon prompts, liturgy, altar art, and children’s time. Like Woodley, Eidson taps into what she’s learned from nature to illuminate spiritual truths, from an Ash Wednesday reflection on soil to a story of blueberry bush-gnawing rabbits. She wrestles with how unjust economic systems and industrial food production leave people hungry (despite ample resources) while damaging creation.

While spiritual growth can sometimes be cast as a solitary and disembodied task, these two books remind us that our bodies and souls are intertwined, that community extends to all of creation, and that to deepen our connection to the ground beneath us and the people and wonder around us is to deepen our connection to God. ♦

Julie Polter is managing editor of *Sojourners* magazine.



cont'd from page 36 sitting on the edge of the world, taking whatever blasts came its way. Like Berrigan, steadfast. And humble.

Sprinkled throughout *Celebrant's Flame* are letters and thoughts from some of the multitude of people whose lives he changed. A particularly lovely touch is that the book is framed by reflections from Frida Berrigan, a beloved niece, and Kateri Boucher, a young Catholic Worker who never met Berrigan. Their eloquent tributes remind us that the legacy of Berrigan endures. "How many people and communities around the world continue to feel the ripples of his presence?" writes Boucher. "I surely feel his here today, still calling me and us to meet the moment we are in, uncertain as it is, and root ourselves firmly and joyfully in the promise of resurrection."

One of the most enjoyable assignments during my time at Sojourners was editing Berrigan's journal from his brief acting career on the set of *The Mission*. The 1986 film depicts a South American Jesuit mission's resistance to the enslavement of the indigenous Guaraní people in the mid-18th century. Berrigan spoke just one word in that movie: "No."

That "no" began many years before when he burned draft files in Catonsville. He followed that liturgy of resistance with decades of saying no to injustice, to despair, to war, to death. But even more moving to me is what he said yes to. Against all odds, Daniel Berrigan spent a lifetime saying yes to community and compassion, to peace and possibility. *Celebrant's Flame* is a bold and compelling invitation for us to do the same. ❖

Joyce Hollyday is a pastor, activist, and author. Her most recent book, *Pillar of Fire*, is a historical novel that celebrates the extraordinary witness of the medieval mystics known as Beguines.



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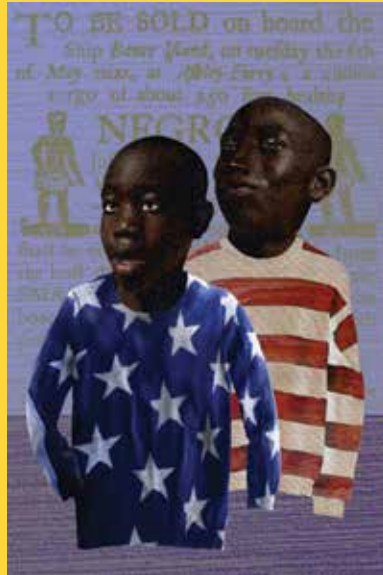
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FATHER / GOD

By Rashaad Thomas



The permanent shiny smudge replaced his bronze
face, his features fade in rusted pictures

I play with pigeon feathers picked from pages
on pulpit splinters that bear his cross of puzzled words.

Warriors unite rage, usher 10% offerings
to dear Black children morning, school wombs empty

Sheets untie laid to rest over waving hands
and church pews ready to fly away with sermons

Remained grounded, did not return as flesh, but I smell
warm metal clap the gospels in the wind, history's confessions.

He asks me to turn past
chapters written to control congregations.

Silent humming and hollering. Elders falling
in the isle sacrificing their lives for next generations'

Silent screaming and crying, soft benediction.

Rashaad Thomas, a U.S. Air Force veteran, is a poet and freelance writer in South Phoenix, Ariz.

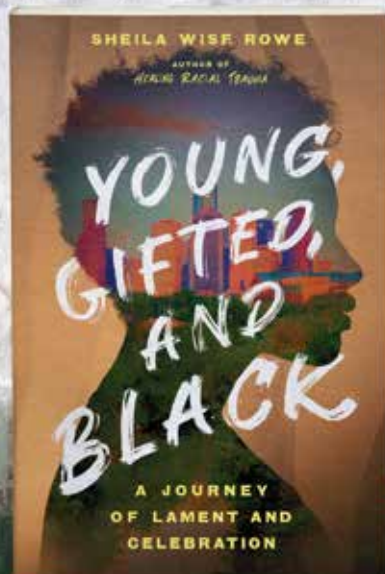
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AWE AT GOD'S BIG REVEAL

Scripture passages are
from the Revised Common
Lectionary, Cycle C

By T. Denise Anderson



Living the Word

Epiphany is not an all-at-once revelation of God's presence with us in the person of Jesus Christ. The entire world was not made aware of Jesus' arrival at the precise moment it hap-

pened. The Magi didn't make their trek to see the Christ child until he was a toddler. Often Jesus' own disciples didn't know who he was when they first encountered him. And little if any positive change occurred in the sociopolitical climate for Israel. The reveal of the Messiah's identity, and the change that would come with it, happened at a painfully slow pace.

In February, we continue the journey of revelation. We recall stories from the Hebrew Bible and Christian Testament of longing and resignation that give way to revelation and encouragement. We see how the faithful through the ages held onto faith as they faced great threat. We see how, despite the prosperity of the wicked, they somehow recognized the hand of God at work.

Perhaps we find ourselves proclaiming to a people who thought a new administration or other promising change would usher in more favorable conditions. Perhaps we personally struggle with how to hold onto hope, not to mention how to encourage our communities to do it. These Epiphany season texts hold us in our lack of clarity and waning faith, reminding us that we are not alone. While we await a substantive change, may the text in some way help our unbelief.

T. Denise Anderson is acting director of Racial Equity and Women's Intercultural Ministries at the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and lives in Louisville, Ky.

SIMON PETER SINKS TO HIS KNEES BECAUSE, LIKE WAYNE AND GARTH, HE'S NOT WORTHY!

FEBRUARY 6

GREAT TO FEEL SMALL

ISAIAH 6:1-13; PSALM 138;
1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-11; LUKE 5:1-11

"We're not worthy!" was a catch phrase from my favorite *Saturday Night Live* skits as a kid. It's what Wayne and Garth would yell while bowing down whenever a celebrity or someone they admired visited them. I'm embarrassed to say I sometimes invoke the phrase when I feel I'm in the presence of greatness, probably dating myself in the process!

While I don't encourage false humility or self-effacing attitudes, at times I wonder if we've lost our ability to feel relatively small. The hubris of our age suggests that even authentic humility escapes us. We create echo chambers of opinions that confirm our biases. Politicians and corporations rarely offer apologies or restitution when confronted with their iniquity and will often double down on their actions. It's not always evident that we feel humbled by or accountable to anything.

The common thread through our texts is the feeling of awe—and inadequacy—that accompanies one's call. Countless songs and sermons have been written about Isaiah's response to God's call—"Here am I; send me!" (6:8)—but that response comes after realizing he is a man of "unclean lips" (verse 5) who needs purification. The psalmist sings of a God who is high but "regards the lowly" (138:6). In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul names himself as the least of the apostles (verse 9) because of his previous persecution of the church. And Simon Peter, when confronted with Jesus' power, sinks to his knees before him and asks him to leave because, like Wayne and Garth, he's not worthy!

Perhaps we might draw contrasts between these examples and the pervasive self-aggrandizement of our time and culture. What happens when one considers one's "unworthiness" before the grandeur of the Most High God? How does it impact the trajectory of one's life? How are others impacted?

FEBRUARY 13

AN ACTIVE FAITHSTYLE

JEREMIAH 17:5-10; PSALM 1;
1 CORINTHIANS 15:12-20; LUKE 6:17-26

Theodicy, from the Greek words for “god” and “justice,” attempts to resolve the goodness, providence, and sovereignty of God amid suffering and injustice. These days, a global pandemic, worsening climate crisis, and the jarring vulnerability of democracy worldwide has left many faithful people wrestling with God’s role in it all. These texts can shed light on how our predecessors in the faith similarly wrestled.

Throughout its anthology of oracles, the book of Jeremiah’s tone wavers between reticent, hopeful, angry, and resigned. In chapter 17, we meet the Weeping Prophet in a moment of great resolve, trusting in God over “mere mortals” (verse 5). We should note that this passage is ahead of an invasion and subsequent exile. Is Jeremiah girding his psychosocial and spiritual loins for impending danger? Probably. He also may be drawing from the psalmist who says the wicked are “like chaff that the wind drives away” (Psalm 1:4). In Corinth, Paul reminds the church of the promises of resurrection, but it’s worth noting that resurrection comes on the heels of death. If death can’t be avoided, is there yet hope beyond death? Paul asserts there is. Finally, as Jesus begins his Sermon on the Plain in Luke, he calls those experiencing peril “blessed,” assuring that their poverty, hunger, and grief will be addressed. By contrast, those who are already considered blessed—the rich, the food-secure, and the highly regarded—have reason to be wary.

In each text, we’re reminded of the ephemeral nature of peril and, for that matter, of peace. This reminder has implications for our work in both environments. Trusting in God in all times means we seek justice when it’s waning and preserve it when it’s strong. The Greek connotations of the words “faith” and “steadfastness” are active. They require us to be resolute, irrespective of the circumstances.

FEBRUARY 20

MAKING A STATEMENT

GENESIS 45:3-11, 15; PSALM 37:1-11, 39-40;
1 CORINTHIANS 15:35-50; LUKE 6:27-38

I have a confession: I love Jesus, but I don’t always like him. I like the “leave Mary alone, Martha” Jesus and the “Let the one without sin cast the first stone” Jesus. The Jesus who includes a Syrophenician woman among “the dogs,” however, disappoints me. The “love your enemies” Jesus (Luke 6:27) is a hard pill to swallow. And the “offer the other cheek” Jesus (verse 29) wants far too much. He’s too radical, even for me.

These texts are too often weaponized. As a minister who works to cultivate racial justice, I commonly get questions about “forgiveness first” and “not harping on the past.” These detractors tell me that the most appropriate Christian response to injustice is to “forgive and forget” or find something redeeming about the past. In either case, mentioning present pain suggests there’s lingering animosity over something that happened ostensibly “so long ago.”

“If you are silent about your pain,” Zora Neale Hurston is purported to have said, “they’ll kill you and say you enjoyed it.” Some Christians use the Bible to pacify hurting people. Thankfully, God doesn’t require silence in times of injustice. In Luke 6, Jesus invites his hearers to make a statement. Offering the other cheek is not passively ignoring what has happened; it’s an act of resistance in the face of injustice.

God’s justice requires us to be confronted with the ways we do harm, which ideally leads to reconciliation, healing, and the repair of breaches. Any justice that ends at punishment stops short of God’s intention. Any justice that offers cheap grace without truly dealing with harm done also falls short. The texts call us to resist injustice and its corrosive influence. We don’t ignore what has been; we instead choose resurrection into something new.

**I LOVE JESUS,
BUT I DON’T
ALWAYS LIKE HIM.**

FEBRUARY 27

CHANGING WITH GOD

EXODUS 34:29-35; PSALM 99;
2 CORINTHIANS 3:12 - 4:2; LUKE 9:28-43

The only constant is change, or so the adage goes. What does it mean when God calls us into change?

When Moses descended from Sinai, his face shone, and no one wanted to get closer to him for fear that they would die (Exodus 34:29). Indeed, they *would* die, but perhaps not in the literal sense. By receiving God’s law, they’d find new life as a covenanted people. But new things can be frightening.

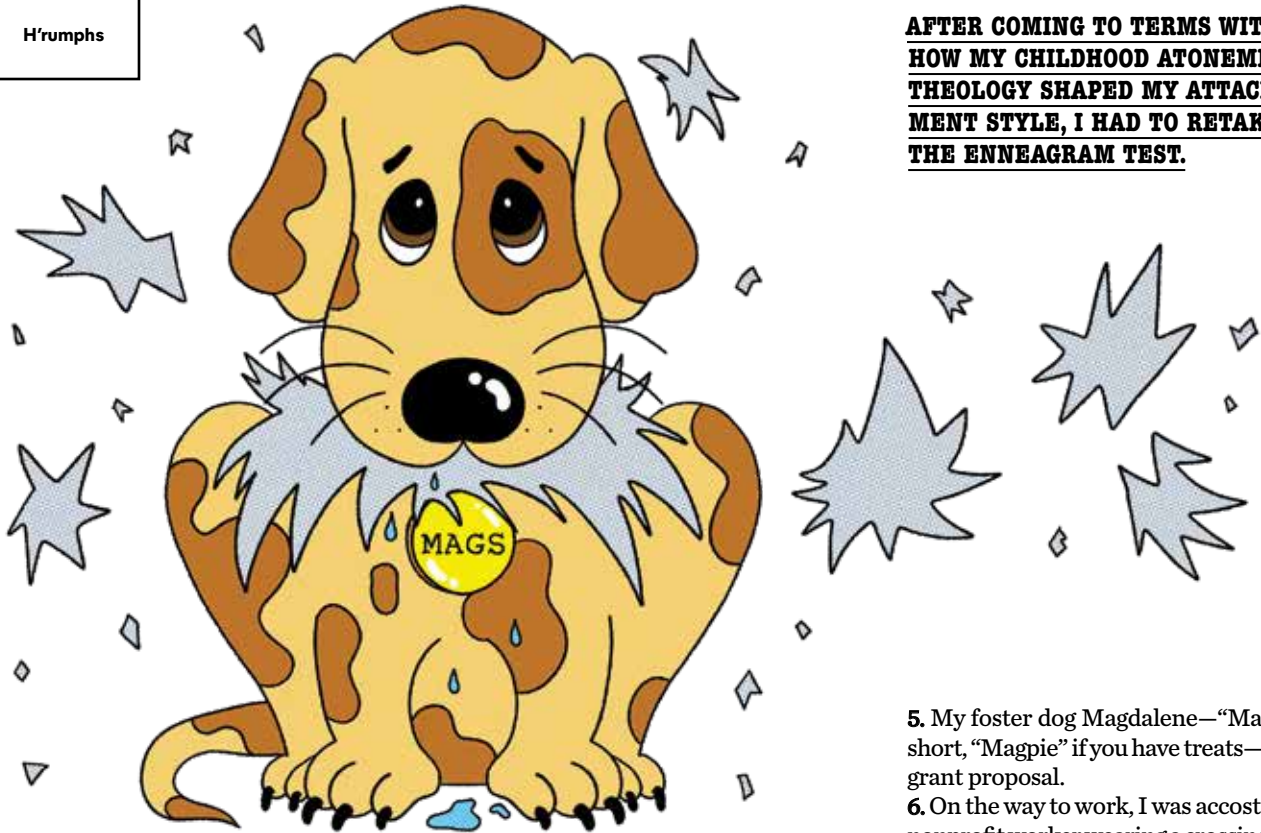
In Luke 9, as Jesus communed with Moses (who represents the law) and Elijah (who represents the prophets) during his transfiguration, Peter wanted to commemorate the event with altars, but a voice from above admonished him: “Listen to Jesus!” (verse 35). Just as Moses brought the law down the mountain so that it would be heeded, Jesus’ transfiguration should also have implications for how those witnesses would live their lives thereafter. Eventually, they’d have to come down from the mountain, be with the community, and put their faith into action. But when the disciples finally descended and had an opportunity to heal a boy, they couldn’t do it.

In 2 Corinthians 3:14, Paul references his opponents who looked back with veiled vision or a hardening of the mind, which kept them from living into their new identity. People rarely want change. We don’t know what change will mean for us, what it will take away, or what it will require. We walk through a world in need of help, but mentally we’re among our own altars of doctrine, theology, and polity, or we’re trying to recapture an extraordinary time in our history. If those things don’t produce change beyond us, what good are they?

This week precedes the season of Lent, when the church considers its mortality and repents of its sins. Many will fast or give up something temporarily, but the real challenge before us is to allow the veil to be lifted. ✕

“Preaching the Word,” Sojourners’ online resource for Bible study and sermon preparation, is available at sojo.net/ptw.

H'rumps



AFTER COMING TO TERMS WITH HOW MY CHILDHOOD ATONEMENT THEOLOGY SHAPED MY ATTACHMENT STYLE, I HAD TO RETAKE THE ENNEAGRAM TEST.

THE BEST PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIAN EXCUSES FOR SKIPPING WORK

By Jenna Barnett

A Sojourners colleague actually used one of these excuses for taking a day off work. If you correctly guess which one, you get to take a day off, no questions asked, at least by me.

1. I volunteered to run the Taizé service at my church and that is *not* the kinda service you can just barge into with clickity-clackity heels on.
2. After coming to terms with how my childhood atonement theology shaped my attachment style, I had to retake the Enneagram test.
3. I had to throw blood at a nuclear warhead in protest of the war machine.
4. Alternate: I became lightheaded after collecting too much of my own blood to throw at a nuke. In retrospect, I should have just used grape juice.

5. My foster dog Magdalene—"Mags" for short, "Magpie" if you have treats—ate my grant proposal.

6. On the way to work, I was accosted by a nonprofit worker wearing a crossing guard uniform who wanted me to sponsor a child in an unspecified African country. I talked to them for 30 minutes about the difference between charity and justice. I didn't give them any money, but we have a date this Friday and I'm paying, so.

7. My bike got a flat tire from an offensively deep pothole. I was able to patch up the tire in just a few minutes, but I felt compelled to report the biking hazard to the city, and after they left me on hold for nearly an hour, I decided to take matters into my own hands by stuffing the hole with crushed cans and bottle caps from a nearby recycle bin and then smoothing out the top with a thick layer of toothpaste that I happened to have with me, thank God.

8. My local library just called (yes, they have their own ringtone on my phone; yes, that ringtone is "What's Going On," by Marvin Gaye), and they have a new collection of 50 cent books, including AN ENTIRE SHELF of liberation theology books that just arrived, so I guess I will see you in two weeks. ✨

Jenna Barnett is associate culture editor, sojo.net.

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**CHRISTINA
BARLAND
EDMONDSON**

is a public speaker,
mental health therapist,

Certified Cultural Intelligence
facilitator, and consultant on leadership
development, antiracism, and mental
health issues. She is also cohost of the
Truth's Table podcast.



**CHAD
BRENNAN**

is coordinator
of the Race,
Religion, and

Justice Project, and founder of
ReNew Partnerships, a Christian
research and consulting ministry
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